

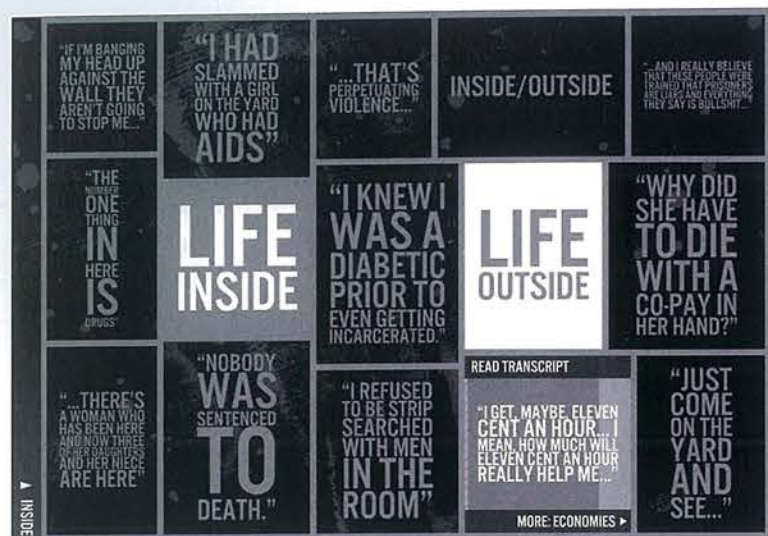
Feminism, Democracy and Participatory Net Works

Kim Paice

In light of the steady stream of criticism that is dedicated to participatory art, the idea of writing for this journal's issue on citizenship strikes me as timely –and felicitous. Partly, my essay responds to this literature, which has not, in my opinion, given adequate attention to the kinds of audience involvement in art that the Internet has sparked. By way of example, I refer readers to art historian Claire Bishop's thoughtful new book, which interrogates the ethical and consensual demands that participatory art has made on spectators. Her investigation turns up uneasy parallels between the fate of democracy and participatory modes of art-making in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, with each eliciting increasing consensus and voluntary subordination of participants.¹ It also concludes that mass connectivity in art treads dangerously on the ground where spectacular culture merges with demands for collective participation.² To expand on this too-narrow view, in what follows, I focus on two Net works that stretch participatory models of art-making into the digital realm of collaborative online environments. This kind of art shifts spectatorship into forms of reader-user engagement, and opens

participation to theories of social inclusion that interrelate feminism and citizenship.

The works discussed here share crucial coordinates with feminist political theories of citizenship and participatory democracy. Their themes include biopower, citizenship, the natural versus juridical status of subjects, and systematic practices of inclusion and exclusion of people by nation-states. As Bishop puts it so well, '**models of democracy in art do not have an intrinsic relation to models of democracy in society**'.³ Yet, the works in this discussion productively sustain tensions between these arenas as they engage political and institutional practices with acute awareness of the complexity of our historical moment. They do so as hybrids of technology and subjectivity that represent new forms of poly-vocal collective identity. This means that both projects consider democracy and identity to be partial and contingent, and use cyberspace in ways that put stresses on systems of communication. These conditions secure what Chela Sandoval, following Donna Haraway, has identified as being keys to future feminist methodology that will be '**useful to all citizen-subjects**': '**the coding necessary to**



remap the “dissembled and reassembled” postmodern “collective and personal self”... must occur according to a guide that is capable of aligning feminist theory with other locations for thought and politics that are aimed at egalitarian social change.⁴

The first work at hand deals with women and the prison-industrial complex. It was made collaboratively by artist Sharon Daniel, the prisoner’s advocacy and human rights organization Justice Now, and a group of women imprisoned in Central California Women’s Facility (CCWF) in Chowchilla, California. Their collaboration began with a 2004 work, called *An Improbable Monument to the end of the Prison Industrial Complex*, which was commissioned by CameraWorks in San Francisco for the exhibition *Monument Recall*.⁵ The project of Daniel *et al* “focused on speculative proposals for a monument to an improbable, but potentially marvelous, end to the prison industrial complex.”... “Ten incarcerated women were asked a series of questions intended to stimulate their imaginations about how they would propose to re-purpose the prison they inhabited as a monument to the end of the current prison system and a memorial to the lives wasted there, if it were to be de-commissioned. Their responses, along with their descriptions of their experience in the prison, were included in this project.”⁶

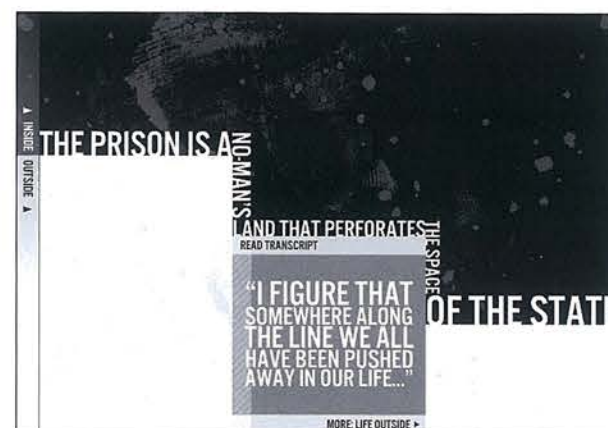
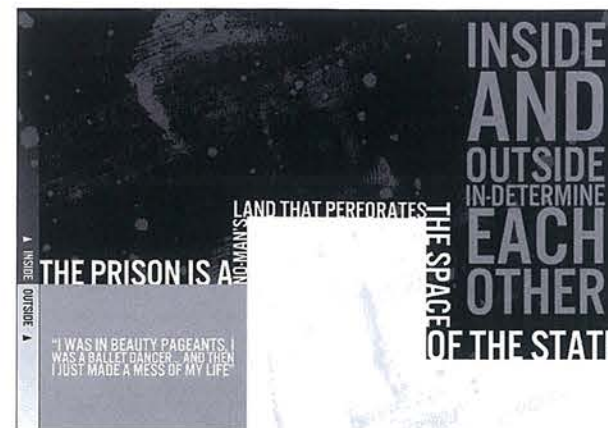
An outgrowth of above-described audio database, the group of Daniel *et al* has created the more substantive work *Public Secrets*, which has been available on the Internet since it appeared in *Vectors: A Journal of Culture and Technology in a Dynamic Vernacular* in 2007.⁷ As its title suggests, the



Sharon Daniel *Public Secrets* (2007) screen captures from online work. Courtesy of artist.

work uses the activity of making information about prisons and incarceration practices public to unconceal ‘the secret injustices of the prison system’. As articulated on the site, the authors contend that information is the opposite of secrecy; and for this reason, *Public Secrets* gives users access to narrative sound clips and text boxes in which inmates discuss their incarceration and cultural theorists and activists make statements concerning secrecy, utopia, human rights, and labor. Appearing like a minimalist palimpsest of split screens in black and white, *Public Secrets* offers a digital array of text boxes and areas of the “screen” with invisible borders, and these spaces link with the recorded statements. Voice-spaces are activated by the cursor’s movement. This allows for the work’s sensitivity to the presence of users and also maps a terrain of women’s experiences against the lack of public literacy about the limiting conditions of the prison-industrial complex.

While Daniel *et al* make no claims to speaking about the category of “woman” as such, *Public Secrets* situates the formation of gender and subjectivity in relation to institutions. In this respect, the work echoes Angela Y. Davis’s views on radical feminism, democracy, and prison abolitionism.⁸ By telling the stories of women, specifically, *Public Secrets* exposes sexual abuse of women prisoners, illegal sterilization of women who have medical procedures and give birth in prison, and the additional exposure of women to such abuses



in so-called “gender-responsive” prisons.⁹

The second Net work that concerns me here is *agoraXchange* (2004). This artwork is a forum for the planning and design of a global politics game.¹⁰ One premise is that the online forum may lead to the creation of an MMO (short for ‘massively multiplayer online role-playing game’) wherein mass connectivity meets nation-building. This involves making hay out of the productive tension between the ‘atopia’ of computer games (and works of art), and the ‘gamespace’ of the military-industrial complex.¹¹ Another is the destabilization of individual authorship and this has involved intervening in the male-dominated worlds of the *digerati* and the gaming industry, where the trope of the damsel-in-distress still lurks.¹² Co-initiated and coordinated by artist Natalie Bookchin and political theorist Jacqueline Stevens, *agoraXchange* was initially hosted by Tate Online [<http://www.agoraxchange.org/>] and has been in its second Beta phase, since 2008.

Both the first and second phase of the work are decidedly colorful and mainly rendered in blues and oranges with gripping images of crowds used as banners. The first phase

of *agoraXchange* greets visitors and members with an invitation: ‘Make the Game, Change the World’. A few of the key categories on the site (and there are many not discussed here!) include a ‘Theater’ section with backstory on the demise of nations, manifestos and decrees, a timeline, and several *fora* – on game design, politics and world news, and other topics. Although the phase one site is no longer active, it remains available to members as a database to be consulted for ideas to be used in other phases of the project. In the Beta phase, the work offers up chat rooms to registrants who may engage in voting on and discussing game design, and the political principles and modes of engagement that will figure in the game, if it is implemented in a future phase of the project. Specifically, the headers for voting polls include: ‘Game Context’, ‘Game Rules’, ‘Player/State Representation’, and ‘User Experience’. Within each of these polling areas, a series of questions is listed with several possible answers given from which to choose. For example, in the ‘Game Context’ section, when asked ‘How should states be run?’, participants may choose ‘Direct Democracy (everyone votes on every issue)’, ‘Representative Democracy (elect representatives)’, ‘Communism (state owns means of production)’, ‘Hereditary dictator (monarchy)’, or ‘Anarchy’. In the ‘User Experience’ section, some of the questions are: ‘Should the game be played in real time?’, ‘What kind of avatars will players be given?’, and ‘What should the game interface look like?’. Participants can vote in each poll, leave comments, and respond to the comments of others.

As outlined on the Beta site, these are the aspirations for each phase of *agoraXchange*: ‘Phase 1: Game Design Forum. In this phase we are posing a series of questions about key aspects of the game design. Phase 2: In the second phase, a committee of the *agoraXchange* initiators, select participants, and invited experts in the field will review the game design room submissions gathered in phase one and will conduct for a series of online discussions. Transcripts of the discussions will be made available on the site. The result of these discussions will be recommendations for three distinct game prototypes. The three prototypes will then be summarized on the site, and participants will have the opportunity to expand on the game design details, working on collaborative image and text documents, and in forums. Phase 3: In the third phase, site participants will be invited to vote on one of the three game design prototypes

to be developed. Phase 4: In the forth and final phase of agoraXchange, we are presently exploring different possibilities, one of which will be to hire a team of programmers and designers to develop the core or kernel software source code for the game, which will then be made available to anyone to modify and improve’.

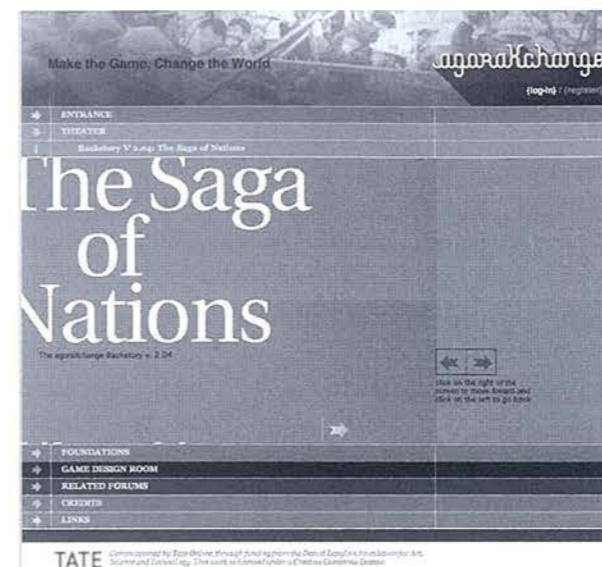
We enter *Public Secrets* and *agoraXchange* via dissimilar entry-points. This asymmetry has to do with the ways that each work represents citizenship and modes of inclusion and exclusion: if the term “*exclusion*” well-describes the status of prisoners in *Public Secrets*, then the term “*inclusion*” characterizes the tacitly invitational mode afforded to game designers-participants and would-be citizens of *agoraXchange*.

Public Secrets advances a number of ways to understand prisons as sites and institutions of exclusion. For example, details about women’s bodies and voices help explicate the reduction of women to bodies with the status of ‘bare life’, the processes by which inmates become mere property of the state, and that they are subjected to starvation, torture, isolation, spatial and social dislocations, and medical treatments that are given at the state’s sole discretion. The role of citizenship enters this work negatively or in terms of reversibility: it is staged as an entity that echoes the process by which rights are stripped from women when they enter a penal institution. In keeping with the use of this inverse dyad, *Public Secrets* openly hails the theories of literary critic Giorgio Agamben by using the phrases ‘bare life’ and ‘*homini sacri*’ as categorical headings linked to the experiences that are documented in the work. Daniel has discussed these terms in her writings on *Public Secrets* for Documenta 12’s Magazine Project, explaining that ‘In Agamben’s analysis, the state can only assert its power and affirm itself by separating “naked life” or biological life from its “forms-of-life” or social and political agency—reducing the subject to a biological entity—a bare life preserved only as an expression of sovereign power’. She continues, observing that ‘The prisoner is the quintessential example of “naked life” who is de-subjectified—in every sense of the word “subject”—political, psychological, and philosophical. The prisoner is denied agency, stripped of her individuality, subjected to cruel and inhumane treatment, and quite literally objectified’.¹³

Yet the approach to representation in *Public Secrets* speaks to a philosophy of inclusion and historiographical specificity that Agamben’s own writings on concentration



camp (and on the ‘state of exception’ as today’s all-pervasive correlate of them) have been criticized for lacking.¹⁴ Daniel’s strategy of collecting voices and testimony about everyday life and institutional conditions faced by women is geared to affording them an opportunity to represent themselves in a self-actualizing and pedagogical fashion. In fact, Daniel consistently includes in her works the voices of marginalized groups, such as women and disproportionately so they are women of color in the case of CCWF, and communities that are disproportionately technologically disenfranchised. She wants to ‘empower participants from specific marginalized groups to represent their own experiences in information space’ and she considers her approach to be part of ‘a paradigm shift in art practice from the aesthetics of the object defined by author function to an activist “aesthetics of dignity”’.¹⁵ If the database is her framework of choice that is because it offers a ‘relational and nonhierarchical’ collaborative system ‘in which acts of writing, imaging, storytelling, and political statement are a collective production, a process rooted in social interaction and



Natalie Bookchin *agoraXchange* (2004) screen captures from online work from Tate website. Courtesy of artist.

dialogue that produces a narrative without authorial consistency’.¹⁶ She explains that the emphasis on collectivity and exploring contradictions over individualism, by stating ‘in early feminist consciousness raising sessions “the personal is political” meant taking the focus off individual responsibility and recognizing that women were a subjugated “class.”’¹⁷

Current scholarship on citizenship likewise informs *agoraXchange*. In fact, a number of the game’s limit-conditions (which figure in the forum in ‘decrees’ and a ‘manifesto’) stem directly from tenets that are explored in the writing of Jacqueline Stevens, a co-producer of the work and a political science professor. Pre-conditions for the game’s alternative political order are listed this way:

1. CITIZENSHIP BY CHOICE, not birth. State borders cannot restrict the movement of goods or people.
2. NO INHERITANCE. Upon death, a person loses all property rights and his or her wealth is redistributed by a global agency to provide education, healthcare, clean water and meet other basic needs throughout the world.
3. NO MARRIAGE. States cannot establish rules for kinship relations. Child-rearing and other long-term interpersonal relations may be established by individual contracts.
4. NO PRIVATE LAND RIGHTS. States own land, with long-term, including lifetime, leases to individuals, partnerships, businesses and nonprofit organizations.

These rules have been crafted to foster a thought-

experiment in governance—what can happen when a political society is free from state-administered kinship rules that fix legal filiation of citizens and the exclusion of others from such membership. In her 1999 book *Reproducing the State*, Stevens argues persuasively that governmental policies that confer citizenship by birthright and by marriage laws exist to ensure the transfer of wealth between generations, and they are inconsistent with building an egalitarian society.¹⁸ There, she describes laws for the formation of intergenerational groups and citizenship as the compensatory activities of men who from boyhood on must cope with their envy of women’s ability to reproduce children.¹⁹ In *States without Nations: Citizenship for Mortals*, Stevens revisits these claims about pathological subjectivity and juridical-political practices. She ventures that ‘the irrational fantasies underlying the desire to control birth and death ... give us the kinds of state that enable war’.²⁰ Using examples of state population control, eugenics and infanticide in antiquity, and Plato’s view of marriage as breeding in *The Republic* (360 B.C.E.), Stevens extends Agamben’s discussion of biopolitics, eugenics, and states’ population policies in the modern era. This reframing calls forth the historical impact of state policies on women, and explicates how the bonds between state-sanctioned violence and reproduction have had determinant roles in war. The makers of *agoraXchange* hope to circumvent these conditions in their political order.

It’s possible to see the constituent power of the people as the crucial thematic of both *agoraXchange* and *Public Secrets*. On this count, I would suggest that the game-forum and the poly-vocal database speak in different ways to a paradox at the heart of modern constitutional democracy, namely, that a nation’s constitution should preserve the constituent power of the people, but instead, once instituted, the constitution perpetually embodies the loss of this power. In *Public Secrets*, subjects speak to the absence of constituent power in the lives of a delimited group of women-citizens of the US. Daniel sees this collaborative project as part of ‘doing cultural democracy’.²¹

Both projects harness self-representational speech-acts, which are in turn productive of a new reality. In this process, subjects gain access to a revised notion of constituent power, and an always-already revised political order.

For her part, Bookchin has highlighted the influences on her digital art of ‘Chantal Mouffe’s writing on agonistic spaces, and Rosalyn Deutsche’s discussions of political

philosopher Claude Lefort's ideas about radical democracy and public space'.²² These thinkers find that modern democracy is characterized by the inessential and contingent nature of social identity that began with the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the democratic revolution which led to the birth of contestable public space and shifted power from monarchs to "the people".²³ Although the form that the game's government should take and whether there should even be states remain undecided to date, *agoraXchange*'s own title, includes the Greek term "agora", meaning "open place of assembly", and signals democracy and rule by the people. Of course, women and slaves were excluded from citizenship in ancient Greece (except in Sparta, 'where women gave orders to men', according to Plutarch).²⁴ But, not for nothing, *agoraXchange* is working toward an egalitarian political order, and this includes rejecting ownership and sale of any resulting game.²⁵

Issuing a call for open participation and authorship, Bookchin-Stevens *et al* have extended the *agora*'s function as open-air marketplace, and licensed their work under a Creative Commons License. As explained in the work's 'manifesto':

'We are using the medium of an online collaborative community not only to facilitate construction of political communities free of ancestral ghosts, but to perform the contingency of all laws, including those regulating citizenship and familial relations. We hope the medium of an online repository drawing on open source technologies and methods for the collaborative development of an online game will highlight how our present political institutions have been designed, albeit haphazardly, by previous generations, and so that we may facilitate people taking the initiative to imagine and share new ideas for governance.'

This policy decision and the work's emphasis on multiple future phases are consistent with the desire to sustain the potentiality of constituent power.

Utopian? Well, yes, sustaining constituent power in an established political order is that elusive. And the producers of *agoraXchange* and *Public Secrets* tell us that they had utopia in mind when they designed their works. Daniel *et al* cites Fredric Jameson's writing on literary and political utopia, while Bookchin-Stevens *et al* skip right to naming Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516). Affiliating utopia and artworks that deal with politics may strike some readers as paradoxical, for as Jameson argues, 'utopia emerges at the

moment of the suspension of the political'.²⁶ Yet he also affirms, that 'It is this suspension, this separation of the political – in all its unchangeable immobility – from daily life and even from the world of the lived and the existential, this externality that serves as the calm before the storm, the stillness at the centre of the hurricane; and that allows us to take hitherto unimaginable mental liberties with structures whose actual modification or abolition scarcely seem in the cards'.²⁷ Thus, the concept of utopia in works, such as *agoraXchange* and *Public Secrets*, may occasion us to imagine radically participatory and egalitarian forms of citizenship. But, since utopia 'is most authentic when we cannot imagine it', Jameson says, it can make us confront 'our imprisonment in a non-utopian present without historicity or futurity – so as to reveal the ideological closure of the system in which we are trapped or confined.' In this scenario, the potential for radical systemic change is bound up with refusing an unacceptable present. Such refusal is precisely what *agoraXchange* and *Public Secrets* invite us to grasp as we confront practices of exclusion that affect all citizen-subjects.

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Notes

1. Claire Bishop *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London and New York: Verso Books, 2012). Influenced by Jacques Rancière's challenges to the ethical turn in recent political art, Bishop tends to value art that brackets political viewpoint and preserves its own poeiticity and a non-instrumentalized aesthetic domain. See also, Jacques Rancière 'The Paradoxes of Political Art' in *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* Trans. Steven Corcoran (New York and London: Continuum, 2010) pp. 134-151
2. Ibid p. 277
3. Ibid p. 279
4. Chela Sandoval *Methodology of the Oppressed* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000) pp.175-178
5. The online component of the exhibition *Improbable Monuments* which was curated by Paula Levine and Trena Noval was formerly available at <http://improbablevoices.net>

6. Sharon Daniel 'The Public Secret: Information and Social Knowledge' in the *Documenta 12 Magazine Project* (2007) http://artsites.ucsc.edu/sdaniel/bordertech/improbable/improb_descript_content.html See, for examples of this discussion: Giorgio Agamben *Means Without End: Notes on Politics* Trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 2000); Giorgio Agamben *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Zone Books: New York, 2002); and Giorgio Agamben *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998)
7. See *Vectors Journal* Vol 2, Issue 2 (Winter 2007) <http://vectors.usc.edu/issues/4/publicsecrets/> Eric Loyer is responsible for the design and programming of this work
8. Fittingly, Davis figures as one of the activist-scholars who are cited in *Public Secrets*. Angela Y. Davis *Abolition Democracy: Beyond Empire, Prisons, and Torture* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005), p. 67. *Public Secrets* includes statements from: Angela Y. Davis *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003)
9. See, 'Justice Now, letter to Senator Loni Hancock, Chair of the Budget and Fiscal Review Subcommittee No. 5 on Corrections, Public Safety, and The Judiciary' 13 March 2012 <http://www.jnow.org/downloads/3.14%20budget%20hearing%20curb%20testimonyjnow.pdf>
10. This work was commissioned by Tate Online and with funding from the Daniel Langlois Foundation for Art, Science and Technology. Curator Jemima Rellie was founder of Tate Online and arranged for *agoraXchange* to be part of that site. The work's first phase of production was partially funded by a Media Art Grant from the Rockefeller Foundation. For a full listing of project credits [<http://agoraxchange.org/index.php?page=279>]
11. McKenzie Wark *Gamer Theory* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2007). See also, James Der Derian *Virtuous War: Mapping The Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment Network* (Boulder and Oxford: Westview Press, 2001)
12. For an overview of this trope in video games, see Anita Sarkeesian's <http://www.feministfrequency.com>, which offers 'an ongoing web series of video commentaries focusing on representations of gender, race, class, sexuality and ability in pop culture' that she has funded with a successful Kickstarter project <http://www.kickstarter.com/projects/566429325/tropes-vs-women-in-video-games/>
13. http://artsites.ucsc.edu/sdaniel/bordertech/publications/PublicSecrets_documenta.pdf
14. See, for example, Chapter 6, 'Reopening the Question of the Animal and the Human' and Dominick LaCapra *History and its Limits: Human, Animal, Violence* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2009).
15. Sharon Daniel 'The Database: An Aesthetics of Dignity' in Victoria Vesna (ed) *Database Aesthetics: Art in the Age of Information Overflow* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2007) p.168

16. Ibid p. 150
17. Sharon Daniel in Veronica Paredes 'HASTAC Profile: Sharon Daniel' (18 April 2012) <http://hastac.org/blogs/vaparedes/2012/04/18/hastac-profile-sharon-daniel>
18. Jacqueline Stevens *Reproducing the State* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999)
19. For a discussion of how *agoraXchange* performs a Nietzschean critique of legal institutions, see, Jacqueline Stevens 'Legal Aesthetics of the Family and The Nation: *agoraXchange* and Notes Toward Re-Imaging the Future' *New York Law Review* 49 (2004-05) pp. 317-352
20. Jacqueline Stevens *States Without Nations: Citizenship for Mortals* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010) p. 3
21. Sharon Daniel 'The Database: An Aesthetics of Dignity' in Victoria Vesna (ed) *Database Aesthetics: Art in the Age of Information Overflow* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2007) pp. 165-166
22. Natalie Bookchin in 'Out in Public: Natalie Bookchin in Conversation with Blake Stimson' *Rhizome*, 9 March 2011 at <http://rhizome.org/editorial/2011/mar/9/out-public-natalie-bookchin-conversation-blake-sti/> See also, Rosalyn Deutsche 'Agoraphobia' in *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 1996) pp. 272-285
23. Deutsche, pp. 273-275
24. Plutarch cited in Louise Bruit Zaidman 'Pandora's Daughters and Rituals in Grecian Cities' in Pauline Schmitt Pantel (ed) *A History of Women in the West: From Ancient Goddesses to Christian Saints* Trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1992) p. 339
25. Game-theorists Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter single out *agoraXchange* for its anti-corporate stance and effort to construct an alternative to Empire. They show how 'games are a paradigmatic media of Empire – planetary, militarized hypercapitalism – and of some of the forces presently challenging it'. Taking cues from Michael Hardt's and Antonio Negri's influential book *Empire*, they consider Empire to be a system of rule effected by global capitalism and a regime of "biopower" that accords with Michel Foucault's framing of that concept. Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2009) p. xi, p. 205. See also, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri *Empire* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2000)
26. Fredric Jameson 'Politics of Utopia' *New Left Review* 25 (Jan-Feb 2004) p. 45
27. Ibid p. 46